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## REFORM AND REFORMERS.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

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WHEN a notorious Tammany official went on the stump and cried "To Hell with Reform," many simple folk were shocked and many less simple pretended to be shocked. But the blatant spoilsman was only voicing violently a sentiment which must often have been felt, more or less clearly, by many an honest man who happened to be endowed with a full share of the invaluable quality for which we have no better name than "sense-of-humor." It was this sentiment which moved Curtis (recalling the Brook Farmers) to assert that "no wise man is long a Reformer, for wisdom sees plainly that growth is steady, sure, and neither condemns nor rejects what is or has been," whereas "Reform is organized distrust." It was this sentiment which moved Lowell (having Garrison in mind) to declare that "there never has been a leader of Reform who was not also a blackguard."

In the "Blithedale Romance," Hawthorne, drawing on his experiences with the same group of enthusiasts that Curtis had associated with, warns us that "no sagacious man will long retain his sagacity if he live exclusively among Reformers and progressive people, without periodically returning into the settled system of things, to correct himself by a new observation from that old standpoint." The biographer of Parkman tells us how that clear-eyed and high-minded historian was ever ready to "ride hard against idealists and Reformers," holding that transcendentalism was weakening to common sense and dangerous to practical aims. "The ideal Reformer," said Parkman, "is generally a nuisance when he tries to deal with the broad and many-sided questions involved in the government of nations." Colonel Higginson, after a wide experience of women and men, has assured us that "Reformers are like Eskimo dogs, which must be hitched to the

sledge each by a separate thong; if put in a common harness, they turn and eat each other up." And Emerson, after declaring that he liked best "the strong and worthy persons who support the social order without hesitation or misgiving," asserted that "the professed philanthropists, it is strange and horrible to say, are an altogether odious set of people whom one would shun as the worst of bores and canters."

Here is a striking unanimity of opinion, and if we are justified in suspecting a sinister motive in the frank desire of the Tammany office-seeker to send below the thing he had reason to hate, we can impute no mean motive to Lowell, to Curtis and to Higginson, who proved themselves active in good works. And if Hawthorne and Parkman and Emerson were never actual leaders in any specific improvement of public affairs, we know them as men of lofty character and of transparent sincerity. Why is it that these men, the very stuff out of which heroic chiefs are made, seem to be united in disliking and in distrusting not only the noble army of Reformers but also the sacred cause of Reform itself? They, at least, had no personal reason to think ill of it; they had no occasion to fear it; they were ever ready to do what might lie in their power to help along the millennium; and, if they held these hostile or contemptuous opinions, we may rest assured they had good and sufficient reasons.

It is not, of course, that they are not friends of progress and that they would not subscribe to Professor William James's declaration that "for morality, life is a war, and the service of the highest is a sort of cosmic patriotism, which also calls for volunteers." It is not that they would hesitate to approve of Whittier's advice to a youth of fifteen: "My lad, if thou wouldst win success, join thyself to some unpopular but noble cause." It is not that they were eager to renounce the doctrines of the Puritans and to adopt the practices of the Impuritans. It is not that they were prepared to accept as their own the bitter remark attributed to the late Thomas B. Reed, "When Dr. Johnson said that Patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel, he did not foresee the infinite possibilities of the word Reform." But although Lowell and Curtis and Higginson might not be prepared to echo the sharp saying of that cynical but devoted public servant, none of them would fail to understand what Reed meant and to appreciate the reasons which moved him to say it.

In any attempt to explain this attitude of theirs the first suggestion which forces itself on us is, that the Reformer is very likely to be lacking in the sense-of-humor, without which a man is more or less incapacitated from getting along comfortably with his fellows. By the very fact that he has set his heart upon the accomplishment of a single improvement, he has reduced his sense of proportion. He is likely to resemble the character in Ibsen's "Wild Duck," who is described as "suffering from chronic integrity in an acute form"; and he tends to have a certain likeness also to the character in Turgeneff's "Dimitri Roudine," who took himself so seriously that "he looked like his own statue erected by a national subscription." He feels himself exalted by the elevation of his own aim in life; and it is hard for him not to become convinced that he is right and always right, whereas the rest of the inhabitants of the globe are wrong and always wrong. Slowly but surely, as the years roll by, he comes to the conclusion that he alone possesses the secret of wisdom, and that he alone holds the universe by the tail.

When Charles Sumner was elected Senator, Theodore Parker wrote him, "I hope you will build on the Rock of Ages, and look to Eternity for your justification." Now, when a man is looking to Eternity and building on the Rock of Ages he may very easily accept himself as a prophet and believe that his denunciation of evil is the result of direct inspiration. In time, as he finds his burning words wasted on stubborn ears, he may be moved to the increasing virulence of invective which is prone to call forth, though never to justify, the retaliatory brutality of personal assault. Reform is tarnished, as Religion is stained, when those who declare themselves its followers discover themselves to be lacking in the ordinary decencies of civilization. There is no denying that there are to-day among the so-called anti-Imperialists and among those who are now urging Total Abstinence, as there were half a century ago among the Anti-slavery leaders, not a few, in good standing among their conscientious associates, who have proved themselves reckless in misrepresentation and malignant in imputing evil motives to their opponents. Apparently, some of those who plant themselves on a lofty pinnacle far above the common herd of mankind, to proclaim a higher rule of life than that which the rest of the world seems willing to accept, feel themselves thereby freed from the obligations prescribed for us

all by every-day courtesy, and sometimes even from those imposed by common honesty.

Something of the same unscrupulousness, due to intensity of conviction, has been discovered also in certain religious enthusiasts; and George Eliot,—so Mr. G. J. Holyoake has recently recorded,—held it as a solemn conviction, the result of a lifetime of observation, that, in proportion as the thoughts of men and women are removed from the earth in which they live to an invisible world, they are led to neglect their duty to each other. Whether this opinion of the emancipated novelist is well founded or not, there is justification for the belief that those who focus their thoughts on a single object, in which the rest of us take a less lively interest, and which is to be achieved only by protracted agitation, are very likely to be led after a while to see this single object out of all proportion and overshadowing everything else in the world. In time, opposition enrages them; and they begin to feel that it can be due only to the malign influence of a personal devil. They are firmly assured that he who is not with them is against them; and they are no longer in doubt that he who is against them is an enemy of mankind. Thus it was that Garrison, never a lovely character, was moved to denounce the Constitution of the United States, as “a league with Death and a covenant with Hell.” In violence, as in vocabulary, this is really not so very unlike the Tammany outcry, “To Hell with Reform.”

Even when the sincere Reformer of this type, the disinterested and public-spirited citizen, is able to refrain from vulgar outbreaks of temper, he may yet yield to the temptation of despising the heads and the hearts of all those who fail to be moved by his appeals and who refuse to look at the world from his special standpoint. It is difficult indeed for him not to feel self-satisfaction in his own superior sagacity and in his own more sensitive integrity; and this self-satisfaction is perilously close to conceit. By the very fact that he sees a need for action which others fail to see, he can hardly help thinking himself more far-sighted than the average. By the very act of taking trouble for the general good, when his fellows stand by inert, he is forced to find himself more public-spirited than other citizens. He is sorely tempted to regard his own coterie of come-outers as the sole reservoirs of virtue and of wisdom.

This leads him to resent bitterly all adverse criticism of his

acts; and it brings him sometimes to the verge of unscrupulousness. Conscious of his own rectitude, convinced of his own disinterestedness, assured of his own sagacity, devoted to the duty of hastening the delayed triumph of his cause, he is sometimes brought to accept the indefensible theory that the end justifies the means. He is sometimes only too willing to "fight the devil with fire." Now, a good man, who was also a wise man, would know that no maxim is falser than that which suggests this method of battling with Satan. Fire is the devil's own element, and he has never any fear of the flames. What he flees from is holy water; and the Reformer who allows the adversary the choice of weapons is a dead man before the ground is paced for the duel.

The Reformer of this type, sincere as he may be, devoted and disinterested, often narrows his outlook till he loses all sense of proportion; and, when violence of speech is followed by unscrupulousness of action, the last state of that man is worse than the first. As he develops these unamiable qualities he is increasingly unlikely to endear himself to his fellow men; and he is thereby thrown back on his associates, many of them already infected with similar failings. Or he is forced to fellowship with himself alone; and thus he is in danger of developing the deadly disease which has aptly been termed "moral egotism." As a shrewd observer has pointed out, "no egotism is so vulnerable as moral egotism; and in no field of action—not even in religion—is its influence more hurtful than in politics." Against this moral egotism few Reformers are immune, only those of complete sanity of body and mind, only those indeed whom nature has happily protected by a double proportion of that universal aseptic for which we have only an inadequate name—"the sense-of-humor."

After all, "the best of men are but men at their best," as the Puritan soldier said long ago; and Reformers of this type, ardent and sincere, although often violent and sometimes unscrupulous, need to be separated sharply from Reformers of another type, who almost justify Emerson's dismissal of them as "canters." Not quite do they justify it; for, although their purpose is less single and although their public spirit is contaminated by self-seeking, they are not altogether humbugs, and they do really believe in what they preach. They are honestly interested in the Reform they are advocating, even though they are far more interested in themselves. They urge it partly for its own sake, no

doubt, but partly also that they may claim credit to themselves for its accomplishment. They do not so much identify themselves with the movement as they identify the movement with themselves. They wish to see the cause conquer, but they are even more eager to push themselves into the best places in the triumphal procession,—not too far behind the big drum. They are ever voluble in interviews and vociferous on the platform; and they are never afraid to march up to the camera's mouth.

Far more than the over-strenuous enthusiasts of the first type do these self-advertising notoriety-seekers of this second type bring discredit on the movements with which they see their advantage in associating themselves. Even if they are not wholly hypocrites, they stand forth offensive in the sight of man. They justify Emerson's liking for "the strong and worthy persons who support the social order without hesitation or misgiving." They justify the hearty contempt which the better class of practical politicians, who are unpretentiously engaged in real work, so often express toward Reformers in general, and which the late Mr. Reed crystallized in the cynical saying already quoted. They are the originals of the sham Reformer whom Ibsen set on the stage in *Stensgaard* and whom Sardou satirized as *Rabagas*—although they often have commingled with their self-seeking somewhat more honesty of purpose than we find in the contemptible creatures etched by the Norwegian dramatist and by the Parisian playwright.

They are not plain hypocrites, like *Tartuffe*, for not only do they lack the depth of that appalling personality, but they are sincere, even if they are shallow. With them Reform is no mere cloak, snatched up hurriedly in the hour of need; it is the garment they have chosen to clothe themselves in, that they may take part in the parade. They are really soldiers in the cause whose uniform they wear, and they are volunteers also, but they have an eye to the bounty and to the pension. That they are marching forward with the flag never prevents them from seeking their own profit, often in devious ways. Some of the most contemptible intriguing it was ever my misfortune to behold was the work of one who was forever "holding high the banner of the Ideal"; and quite the most contemptible act of selfish cowardice within my knowledge was committed by one who stood before the public as the very embodiment of Reform, and who as a

Reformer was perfectly sincere, although undeniably self-seeking. When we come to contrast the two types of Reformer that have been considered, we find that it is difficult to draw a precise line marking off the one from the other. At the head of one type there is stalwart disinterestedness, and at the foot of the other there is shallow self-seeking, but in the middle they shade into each other by imperceptible degrees, since there is often more than a suspicion of self-esteem in the one and more than a leaven of sincerity in the other.

A third type there is, which it is not easy to set off sharply from the second. In this third class, we find the men whose fervor in behalf of a noble cause seems to have its source, more or less, in their desire to get into better company than their reputation would warrant. They seek to put forward their civic virtues as a plea in extenuation for their private looseness or their business laxity. They are the bad men who advocate one good thing, possibly because no man is absolutely bad, but more probably because they see in this advocacy a chance to associate themselves with good men, who would not otherwise be willing to fellowship with them. Reform makes strange bedfellows; and even men of the purest character are rarely over-particular in refusing the aid of voluntary allies whose own record is far from spotless. Perhaps it would be unfair to call them wolves in sheep's clothing, because the wolf rarely appears in that costume until after he has sated his hunger for lamb; but it is not unfair to describe them as black sheep who are seeking to smuggle themselves back into the flock of honest folk. Perhaps, again, it would not be just to dismiss them frankly as self-seeking hypocrites; but there is no injustice in suggesting that they are

"Ready to make up for sins they are inclined to  
By damning those they have no mind to."

Sometimes they persist in their own evil practices, while denouncing virtuously the ill deeds of others. For instance, one of the newspapers of New York, which was foremost in proclaiming the necessity of abolishing the spoils system and of introducing the Australian ballot, was at that time the property of a notorious railroad wrecker, who was using its financial columns to support his own stock-jobbing. But more often than not they pretend to have abjured sack and to desire to live cleanly. They re-



semble certain heroines of the modern drama, in that they have "a past" which they want to have overlooked or condoned in the present. Thus, some years ago, there appeared as the chief advocate of a so-called legal reform a lawyer of commanding ability whose own indefensible practices as the counsel of Fisk and Gould had brought him perilously near to being disbarred.

Another example is even more significant. In one of the largest cities in the Union a few years ago, in a truce of the interminable campaign against municipal misrule, suddenly half a dozen young men projected themselves into view as the conspicuous champions of civic virtue in its austere attitude. They stood up to be counted in favor of a procedure which did not commend itself to older and wiser leaders. They came out broadly in the full glare of the spot-light of newspaper notoriety. But who were these obscure Reformers who offered themselves up like imitators of Arnold of Winkelreid? However futile their act, at least their intention was worthy; and most people dismissed them from mind as merely misguided enthusiasts. But a gentleman with a wide acquaintance and a long memory happened to drop the remark in a club that it was not a little curious that two of these indiscreet Reformers had been partners in business with different friends of his, and that his friends had each of them been forced to dissolve the partnership from disapproval of the practices of the young men who were now prancing into the lists as knights of civic purity. He had mentioned no names; but another member of the club promptly spoke up and asked if Mr. So-and-so was meant, mentioning one of half a dozen. The answer was that Mr. So-and-so had not been in the mind of the first speaker. Whereupon the second said that Mr. So-and-so could be added to the other two; "He was my partner a few years ago, and I broke up the firm because I did not like the way he did business."

The examples of this type of Reformer are far less numerous than the examples of the two other types; but a Reform movement is singularly fortunate that has not among its adherents more than one man of this unworthy character, often thrusting himself into undue prominence. There is yet a fourth group, which is likely to be the largest of all, and also the least useful and the least estimable. This consists of the men and women who are forever longing for novelty for its own sake, and who wish

to see the established order change, merely because it is the established order, and merely because they themselves are too flighty to feel the need of keeping the ancient landmarks. They are not devoted to any one Reform in particular, but to all Reforms in general. They are wholly without the discrimination which warns us that, when a man is marching to a tune inaudible to others, he may be keeping step to the music of the spheres or he may be following the footsteps of the Rat-Wife.

They are the faddists, the freaks, the cranks, who take up with every passing whim of the moment and who tag themselves to the tail of every cause, whether it is wise or otherwise, incapable of espousing a true Reform for its merits, and ready to embrace a sham simply because it has been accepted by others as scatter-brained as they are themselves. To-day they may be vegetarians, who clothe themselves only in animal fibre; yesterday they revered the revelations of the spirit-rappers; to-morrow they will rely on absent treatment for the relief of chronic disease. They vaunt themselves as Theosophists for a season, only to appear the next year as Christian Scientists. We find them plentifully in the Salem witchcraft trials, in the more violent religious revivals, and again in the Transcendental movement. In the pages of Lowell's pungent papers on Thoreau, we have the brilliant record of his recollection of this riffraff of Reform as he had occasion to observe it in his youth. They cling to the skirts of every cause, impeding its advance and making it more or less ridiculous. Sometimes they are numerous enough to capture the control of the organization, which is sure to founder then, even if it was in sight of port. Sometimes they are weak-willed creatures who scarcely know what it is that they really want; and sometimes they are hysteric extremists who, in the apt phrase of the late Charles Dudley Warner, will not be satisfied until the President of the United States is a black woman.

When John Morrissey, prize-fighter and ward politician, once walked from his gambling-house at Saratoga to the town hall to size up a Reform convention then in session there, he came out promptly, declaring that he was not afraid of anything those fellows could do, since they were "only a lot of long-haired men and of short-haired women." What the ward politician treated with contempt, the practical man has no respect for. These feeble folk, light-witted and loud-voiced, are forever warning away the

hard-headed and strong-armed men of affairs, without whose sympathy no cause is likely to make much progress, and without whose active aid nothing lasting is likely to be accomplished. It is only when these men of affairs conquer their disgust for the creatures of this type, and ally themselves with the devoted enthusiasts of the first group, that any Reform begins really to have a chance of success. The enthusiasts supply the moral fervor, and the men of affairs supply the solid common sense, without an abundance of which nothing ever gets itself done in this world.

These men of affairs, not original enthusiasts and tardily converted by reasons which appealed to their intelligence, make up a fifth class of Reformer, the men interested in a specific cause and carrying it steadily to its final accomplishment without haste and without rest. They, and they alone, assure the victory. The original enthusiasts must convert them or nothing will happen; for until they are converted the case is hopeless. When they begin to join in sufficient numbers, the end is near; the cause is won, and the final triumph is then only a question of time. They are not the professed philanthropists whom Emerson shrank from; they are "the strong and worthy men who support the social order," but who have been made to see the danger of some special leak in the ship of state and who are willing to man the pumps and to lend a hand to the caulking, returning promptly to their own work whenever this single task is finished to their satisfaction. When they see that the time is come, they do not hesitate; they enlist "for three years or the war." They take up the good work, heartily, keeping their eye on that, and overcoming their distaste for the company they have to keep. They are resolved to get the job done, even if they have to labor by the side of the freak and of the fraud, of the wild-eyed crank and of the semi-repentant crook.

Mr. Morley tells us that Gladstone had "none of that detachment often found among superior minds, which we honor for its disinterestedness, even while we lament its impotence in result." In other words, Gladstone was a practical politician. He was constructive, and not merely critical. He was not a moral egotist, but a public servant, who helped to get things done. No doubt, the Abolitionists, in spite of their constant wrangling with one another, and in spite of their occasional lack of patriotism, did arouse the attention of the country and did help to centre it on

an evil that needed to be rooted up; but the slaves were freed by Lincoln, the very practical politician, who had at least one characteristic in common with Gladstone, in that he never mistook for "courage or independence the unhappy preference for having a party or an opinion exclusively for one's self." Lincoln was patient and long-suffering; he bided his time; he was at once persuasive and fearless, but he was never needlessly aggressive. He was wholly free from the unpleasant and unprofitable characteristic which Lowell declares to be a possession of too many Reformers—"that vindictive love of virtue which spreads the stool of repentance with thistle-burrs, before they invite the erring to seat themselves thereon."

It is not the amateur enthusiast who achieves lasting results, it is the professional politician of the higher type, a class far more numerous in this country than most of us are prepared to admit. He takes care of his fences, of course, but he serves the public faithfully to the best of his ability. He knows how to get things done, as he does not dwell alone in the clouds but keeps his feet firm on the soil. His idealism is practical, no doubt, but it is real enough. He is always an opportunist, taking the most he can get at the moment, however little it may be, and however insufficient he may deem it. He is not easily discouraged, for he knows only too well that "politics is one long second best"; and he is firmly resolved to get a little more the next time of asking, until which time he possesses his soul in patience, not having his heart set on any single cause. He finds solid comfort in the belief that in the very long run all Reforms are inevitable; they are certain to be established sooner or later; and if they never come to pass, the reason must be sought in the fact that they are not really Reforms, however plausible they may be.

This, indeed, is what most sharply sets off the practical politician of the better class from the narrower and more eager Reformers. He is a professional; and they are amateurs. He is free from the irascible impatience that makes them feverish. He is interested in many movements; and they have centred their energy on only one. He is likely to have far more confidence in the education of public opinion than in any swift overturning due to hasty legislation. Bitter experience has taught him that mere lawmaking is often worse than useless, since a law is never enforced properly when it has not public opinion behind it, and

since the law itself is easily obtained and easily enforced when it is only the crystallization of the wish of the people. The amateurs put far too much faith in special measures and in legislative devices of one kind or another. The professional has a deep contempt for these patent-medicines of lawmaking; and he does not expect human nature to be changed in the twinkling of an eye just because a bill has been passed by the legislature. He does not believe that bad men will renounce their evil ways overnight, or that the millennium will certainly arrive the morning after election.

But the amateurs, the ardent advocates of a single cause, lack this self-restraint just as they lack the sense of proportion. The more hectic and hysteric their impatience, the more bitter their disappointment at the delay of the one Reform they have espoused. And their language is often as bitter as their disappointment; for enthusiasm is like milk, in that even boiling will not always prevent it from turning sour. They are likely to suffer from acute attacks of moral dyspepsia, in which they feel that all is for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds. They think scorn of the rest of us whom they have failed to convert; and they pour out the vials of their wrath on us. Their exacerbated invective is often sad evidence of the wisdom of Mr. Morley's assertion that "love of truth is, more often than we think, only a fine name for temper." They are prone then to justify Curtis's opinion that "Reform is organized distrust." They are prompt to predict the direst of calamities, since mankind has refused so far to adopt their sole specific for all evils; and not infrequently they seem to regret that their prophecies of evil are not swiftly enough fulfilled.

These unlovely characteristics account for the repulsion which many a worthy citizen feels for the professed Reformers. He dislikes their vehemence; and he detests what seems to him their unpatriotic readiness to vilify their own country. He is swift to smile when he reads the contemptuous words of Emerson and Lowell and Curtis. But he is derelict to his duty as a good citizen if he is content to dismiss the Reformer from his mind and to go on his way self-satisfied, leaving things as they are and letting the affairs of the commonwealth take care of themselves. Eternal vigilance is the price of progress also; and he is not a good citizen if he is willing to relinquish full control to

the professional politicians, who are not all faithful servants of the Republic and who have in their ranks a large proportion of the baser sort, grasping and greedy spoilsmen, holding office for their own pocket all the time.

The mob of Reformers may be made up of men of every degree of sincerity and disinterestedness, and it may include all the varieties differentiated in the preceding paragraphs. Some of its members may be narrow and impetuous; some may be perfervid and foolish; some may be self-seeking and unscrupulous; and only a few may be unselfish and wise and efficient. We may smile at their exaggerations and at their diatribes; we may laugh at their conceit and their absurdities; we may be irritated by their perversities; but it is only at our peril that we stop our ears absolutely to their appeals and their warnings. Reformers, lofty or lowly, perform a needed function; and in the social machine even the eccentric and the crank are useful.

We ought not to let our sense of humor overcome our sense of duty. We may scoff at Reformers if we like, but we ought to work with them, when we must, profiting by their zeal and utilizing their energy. Even if there is warrant for suspicion sometimes, there is ever a core of true disinterestedness at the centre; and, after all, even the long-haired men and the short-haired women may be agents in the uplift which gives a higher hope for humanity in the future. To refuse, once for all, to join hands with Reformers, because of distaste for some of their deeds and of disgust at some of their work, is to stand by while the clock of progress is stopped. It is to help to stiffen the body politic into a Chinese lethargy. It is to renounce the keen pleasure of struggling sturdily for the establishment of justice. It is to lag lazily behind, when nobler men are striving to prove the everlasting truth of a fine saying of Pascal's, which has been rendered into rhythmic English: "Ebbing and flowing, yet ever progressing, the tides of life creep up the sands of Time."

BRANDER MATTHEWS.